

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LAGOS 05254 270715Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 5254

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, NI
SUBJECT: SHARIA: A FIRE BELL IN THE NIGHT?

SUMMARY: IT IS OUR ANALYSIS THAT IF CIVILIAN
POLITICIANS CANNOT DO BETTER THAN THE CONSTITUENT
ASSEMBLY HAS DONE ON SHARIA, CIVILIAN RULE IN
NIGERIA IN 1979 WON'T WORK. END SUMMARY.

1. IF, LAST OCTOBER WHEN THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY
(CA) CONVENED, ONE HAD BEEN SO BOLD AS TO DEVISE
A "WORST CASE" SCENARIO AS TO HOW THE CA WOULD HANDLE
THE SHARIA ISSUE, IT COULD HARDLY HAVE BEEN GRIMMER
THAN THE DEBACLE WHICH WE HAVE WITNESSED OVER THE
PAST TWO WEEKS. A "WORST CASE" SCENARIO PROBABLY
WOULD HAVE ENTAILED THE EMERGENCE OF CONFLICT IN
THE CA ALONG REGIONAL/RELIGIOUS LINES, THE INABILITY OF
COMPROMISING ELEMENTS TO WORK OUT SOLUTION, ONE SIDE OR THE
OTHER RAMMING THROUGH ITS VIEWPOINT, A WALKOUT FROM THE
ASSEMBLY BY THE LOSING SIDE, THE SUBSEQUENT DISSOLUTION
OF THE ASSEMBLY THE FEDERAL MILITARY GOVERNMENT, AND
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PAGE 02 LAGOS 05254 270715Z

THE CONTINUATION OF MILITARY RULE. UP TO NOW, WE HAVE IN
REALITY HAD ALL OF THE ELEMENTS IN THAT SCENARIO BUT FOR
THE LAST TWO. INSTEAD, WE HAVE SEEN A DRAMATIC APPEAL TO THE
CA BY THE HEAD OF STATE IN THE MIDST OF TENSION, THREATS
OF DISORDER, AND RUMORS THAT THE MILITARY MIGHT DISSOLVE
THE CA.

2. RENEWED EFFORTS ARE NOW BEING MADE IN THE CA TO FIND A SOLUTION. HOWEVER, REGARDLESS OF THEIR OUTCOME, WHAT WE HAVE SEEN UP TO NOW BODES ILL FOR THE FUTURE OF CIVILIAN POLITICS IN NIGERIA. WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN THE CA OVER SHARIA MAY BE A FIRE BELL IN THE NIGHT ABOUT WHAT TO EXPECT IN 1979. AT THE VERY LEAST, IT PROVES THAT THE DEEPLY DIVISIVE CURRENTS WHICH MARKED NIGERIA'S POST-INDEPENDENCE POLITICAL HISTORY CONTINUE TO FLOW AS STRONGLY AS EVER BENEATH THE SURFACE OF MILITARY RULE. WITHIN THAT CONTEXT, SEVERAL ELEMENTS ARE NOTABLE.

3. POLITICAL CLEAVAGES: THE SHARIA CRISIS IN THE CA SUGGESTS THAT THE BASIC POLITICAL CLEAVAGES IN THE COUNTRY CONTINUE TO BE CONGRUENT WITH THE REGIONAL/ RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS WHICH LED TO THE COLLAPSE OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN 1965. IT WOULD OF COURSE HAVE BEEN TOO MUCH TO HAVE EXPECTED THAT SUCH BASIC FEATURES IN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED BY THE EVENTS OF THE PAST 13 YEARS. WHAT IS REMARKABLE, HOWEVER, IS THAT SO LITTLE MAY HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMED. THE MOST POSITIVE CHANGE WHICH WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO DETECT IS THAT THE UNITY OF THE NORTH HAS BROKEN UP TO THE POINT THAT THERE MAY BE MORE FLUIDITY AND ACCOMMODATION IN THIS SYSTEM.

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PAGE 03 LAGOS 05254 270715Z

4. POLITICAL MODERATION: IN RECENT YEARS, IT HAS BECOME A POLITICAL SHIBBOLETH IN THIS COUNTRY THAT IT MUST EMBRACE MODERATION OR IT WILL BE CONDEMNED TO REPEAT THE BITTER EXPERIENCES OF THE PAST. UNFORTUNATELY THE EVENTS IN THE CA SUGGEST THAT, LIP SERVICE TO THE CONTRARY, NIGERIAN POLITICIANS STILL TEND TO DEFINE MODERATION AS THE OTHER SIDE GIVING IN TO THEIR VIEWPOINT.

5. POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: IT IS DISCOURAGING AND IN OUR VIEW A LACK OF LEADERSHIP THAT MEMBERS OF THE CA WERE UNABLE TO WORK OUT A COMPROMISE SOLUTION FOR THE SHARIA PROBLEM. THERE WAS A GREAT DEAL OF LEAD TIME. THE ISSUE WAS TABBED AS A SERIOUS POTENTIAL PROBLEM WELL IN ADVANCE. THERE WERE VARIOUS WAYS OF AVOIDING IT. NEVERTHELESS, BECAUSE OF A FAILURE OF LEADERSHIP, THE CA CAME DOWN AN EIGHT-MONTH CLEAR ROAD AND RAMMED DIRECTLY INTO THE SHARIA TREE ANYWAY. COCKTAIL PARTY CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IN THIS COUNTRY HAS BEEN THAT THE CIVILIAN POLITICIANS WILL MAKE A BASH OF IT IN 1979 AND THE "ARMY BOYS" WILL HAVE TO STEP BACK IN TO SAVE THE

SITUATION. IT CAN BE SAID, ON A SMALL SCALE, THAT
THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT HAPPENED ON SHARIA.

6. AS WE SAID ABOVE, EVENTS OF THE LAST TWO WEEKS
BODE ILL FOR THE FUTURE. WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF DIFFICULT ECONOMIC
AND POLITICAL SITUATIONS, THE NIGERIANS ARE ERECTING AND HOPING
TO PUT INTO OPERATION A LARGE AND COMPLEX SYSTEM OF
DEMOCRATIC CIVILIAN RULE. IF THE CIVILIANS CAN'T
DO BETTER THAN THE CA HAS DONE ON SHARIA, IT WON'T
WORK.

7. THIS TELEGRAM DRAFTED BY POLITICAL OFFICER
ROBERT C. FRASURE.
WYMAN
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PAGE 04 LAGOS 05254 270715Z

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